

The Yukon Trail

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An Alaskan Love Story

By William Macleod Raine

ELLIOT IS INTRODUCED TO MISS O'NEILL AND WITHIN A FEW HOURS THEY HAVE A TERRIFYING ADVENTURE

Synopsis.—As a representative of the government Gordon Elliot is on his way to Alaska to investigate coal claims. On the boat he meets and becomes interested in a fellow passenger whom he learns is Sheba O'Neill, also "going in." Colby Macdonald, active head of the land-grabbing syndicate under investigation, comes aboard. Macdonald is attacked by mine laborers whom he had discharged, and the active intervention of Elliot probably saves his life. Elliot and Macdonald become in a measure friendly, though the latter does not know that Elliot is on a mission which threatens to spoil plans of Macdonald to acquire millions of dollars through the unlawful exploitation of immensely valuable coal fields. Elliot also "gets a line" on the position occupied by Wally Selfridge, Macdonald's right-hand man, who is returning from a visit to "the States," where he had gone in an effort to convince the authorities that there was nothing wrong in Macdonald's methods.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

The pursuer gave information to Elliot. "They call her Aunt Sheba. The kids are on their way in to their father, who is an engineer on one of the creeks back of Katma. Their mother died two months ago. Miss O'Neill met them first aboard the Skagit on the way up and she has mothered them ever since."

The eyes of Elliot rested on Miss O'Neill. "She loves children."

"She sure does—no bluff about that."

An imp of mischief sparkled in the eye of the supercargo. "Not married yourself, are you, Mr. Elliot?"

"No."

"Hmp!"

That was all he said, but Gordon felt the blood creep into his face. This annoyed him, so he added brusquely: "And not likely to be."

When the call for breakfast came Miss O'Neill took her retinue of youngsters with her to the dining room. Looking across from his seat at an adjoining table, Elliot could see her waiting upon them with a fine absorption in their needs.

Before they had been long in the dining room Macdonald came in carrying a sheaf of business papers. He glanced around, recognized Elliot, and made instantly for the seat across the table from him. On his face and head were many marks of the recent battle.

"Trade you a cauliflower ear for a pair of black eyes, Mr. Elliot," he laughed as he shook hands with the man whose name he had just learned from the pursuer.

The grip of his brown, muscular hand was strong. It was in character with the steady, cool eyes set deep beneath the frowning forehead, with the confident carriage of the deep, broad shoulders.

"You might throw in several other little souvenirs to boot and not miss them," suggested Elliot with a smile.

Macdonald nodded indifferently. "I gave and I took, which was as it should



"But We Ain't Through With Colby Macdonald Yet."

be. But it's different with you, Mr. Elliot. This wasn't your row."

"I hadn't been in a good mix-up since I left college. It did me a lot of good."

"Much obliged, anyhow." He turned his attention to a lady entering the dining room. "Mornin', Mrs. Selfridge. How's Wally?"

She threw up her hands in despair. "He's on his second bottle of liniment already. I expect those ruffians have ruined his singing voice. When I think of how close you both came to death last night—"

"I don't know about Wally, but I had no notion of dying. Mrs. Selfridge. They messed us up a bit. That was all."

"But they meant to kill you, the cowards. And they almost did it too. Look at Wally—confined to his bed and speaking in a whisper. Look at you—a wreck, horribly beaten up, al-

most drowned. We must drive the villains out of the country or send them to prison."

"Am I a wreck?" the big Scotsman wanted to know. "I feel as husky as a well-fed malamute."

"Oh, you talk. But we all know you—how brave and strong you are. That's why this outrage ought to be punished. What would Alaska do if anything happened to you?"

"I hadn't thought of that," admitted Macdonald. "The North would have to go out of business, I suppose. But you're right about one thing, Mrs. Selfridge. I'm brave and strong enough at the breakfast table. Steward, will you bring me a double order of these shirred eggs—and a small steak?"

"Well, I'm glad you can still joke, Mr. Macdonald, after such a terrible experience. All I can say is that I hope Wally isn't permanently injured." Mrs. Selfridge sighed and passed to her place.

The eyes of the big man twinkled. "Our little fracas has been a godsend to Mrs. Selfridge. Wally and I will both emerge as heroes of a desperate struggle. You won't even get a mention. But it's a pity about Wally's injuries—and his singing voice."

The younger man agreed with a gravity back of which his amusement was apparent. The share of Selfridge in the battle had been limited to leg work only, but this had not been enough to keep him from being overhauled and having his throat squeezed. Elliot finished breakfast and left Macdonald looking over a long type-written document. The paper was a report Selfridge had brought in to him from a clerk in the general land office. The big Canadian and the men he represented were dealing directly with the heads of the government departments, but they thought it part of wisdom to keep in their employ subordinates in the capacity of secret service agents to spy upon the higher-ups.

CHAPTER III.

The Crevasse.

For an hour before the Hannah reached Katma Miss O'Neill was busy getting her little brood ready. Her heart was as tender as a Madonna to these lambs so ill fitted to face a frigid waste. Their mother had been a good woman. She could tell that. But she had no way of knowing what kind of man their father might be. When they said their sniffling good-bys at Katma she was suspiciously bright and merry. Soon the children were laughing again with her.

One glance at their father, who introduced himself to Miss O'Neill as John Husted, relieved her mind greatly. His spontaneous delight at seeing them again and his choking gratitude to her for having looked after them were evidence enough that this kind-eyed man meant to be both father and mother to his recovered little folks.

Her temporary family stood on the end of the wharf and called good-bys to the girl. When they turned away she went directly to her room.

Elliot was passing forward when Miss O'Neill opened her stateroom door to go in. The eyes of the young woman were blinded with tears and she was biting her lip to keep back the emotion that welled up. He knew she was very fond of the motherless children, but he guessed at an additional reason for her sobs. She, too, was as untaught as a child in the life of this frontier land. Whatever she found here—how much of hardship or happiness or grief or woe—she knew that she had left behind forever the safe harbor of quiet waters in which her life craft had always floated.

It came on to rain in the afternoon. Heavy clouds swept across from the mountains, and the sodden sky opened like a sluice-box. The Kuskak contingent, driven indoors, resorted to bridge. Miss O'Neill read. Gordon Elliot wrote letters, dawkled over magazines, and lounged alternately in the ladies' parlor and the smoking room, where Macdonald, Strong, a hardware merchant from Fairbanks, and a pair of sour-dough miners had settled themselves to a poker game that was to last all night and well into the next day.

Of the two bridge tables all the players were old-timers except Mrs. Mallory. She had come in over the

ice for the first time last winter. The other women felt that she was a bird of passage, that the frozen Arctic could be no more than a whim to her. They deferred a little to her because she knew the great world—New York, Vienna, London, Paris. Great names fell from her lips casually and carelessly. She was full of spicy little anecdotes about German royalty and the British aristocracy. It was no wonder, Gordon Elliot thought, that she had rather stunned the little social set of Kuskak.

Through Northrup and Trelawney a new slant on Macdonald was given to Gordon. He had fallen into casual talk with them after dinner on the fore deck. To his surprise the young man discovered that they bore him no grudge at all for his interference the night before.

"But we ain't through with Colby Macdonald yet," Trelawney explained. "Mind, I don't say we're going to get him. Nothing like that. Here's the point. We stand for Labor. He stands for Capital. See? Things ain't what they used to be in Alaska, and it's because of Colby Macdonald and his friends. They're grabbers—that's what they are. They want the whole works. Understand? It's up to us to fight, ain't it?"

Later Elliot put this viewpoint before Strong.

"There's something in it," the miner agreed. "Wages have gone down, and it's partly because the big fellows are consolidating interests. Alaska ain't a poor man's country the way it was. But Mac ain't to blame for that. He has to play the game the way the cards are dealt out."

The sky was clear again when the Hannah drew in to the wharf at Moose Head to unload freight, but the mud in the unpaved streets leading to the business section of the little frontier town was in step deep. Many of the passengers hurried ashore to make the most of the five-hour stop. Elliot put on a pair of heavy boots and started uptown.

At the end of the wharf he passed Miss O'Neill. She wore no rubbers and she had come to a halt at the beginning of the mud. After a momentary indecision she returned slowly to the boat.

The young man walked up into the town, but ten minutes later he crossed the gangplank of the Hannah again with a package under his arm. Miss O'Neill was sitting on the forward deck, making a pretense to herself of reading.

He moved over to where she sat and lifted his hat. "I hope you won't think it a liberty, Miss O'Neill, but I've brought you some rubbers from a store uptown. I noticed you couldn't get ashore without them."

The girl was visibly embarrassed. She was not at all certain of the right thing to do. Where she had been brought up young men did not offer courtesies of this sort so informally.

"I—I think I won't need them, thank you. I've decided not to leave the boat," she answered shyly.

Elliot had never been accused of being a quitter. Having begun this, he proposed to see it out. He caught sight of the pursuer superintending the discharge of cargo and called to him by name. The officer joined them a pad of paper and a pencil in his hand.

"I'm trying to persuade Miss O'Neill that she ought to go ashore while we're lying here. What was it you told me about the waterfall back of the town?"

"Finest thing of its kind in Alaska. Everyone takes it in. We won't get away till night. You've plenty of time if you want to see it."

"Now, will you please introduce me to Miss O'Neill formally?"

The pursuer went through the usual formula of presentation, adding that Elliot was a government official on his way to Kuskak. Having done his duty by the young man, the busy supercargo retired.

"I'm sure it would do you good to walk up to the waterfall with me, Miss O'Neill," urged Elliot.

She met a little dubiously the smile that would not stay quite extinguished on his good-looking, boyish face. Why shouldn't she go with him, since it was the American way for unchaperoned youth to enjoy itself naturally?

"If they'll fit," the girl answered, eying the rubbers.

Gordon dropped to his knees and demonstrated that they would.

As they walked along the muddy street she gave him a friendly little nod of thanks. "Good of you to take the trouble to look out for me."

He laughed. "It was myself I was looking out for. I am a stranger in the country and was awfully lonesome."

"Is it that this is your first time in, too?" she asked shyly.

"You're going to Kuskak, aren't you? Do you know anybody there?" replied Elliot.

"My cousin lives there, but I haven't seen her since I was ten. She's an American. Eleven years ago she visited us in Ireland."

"I'm glad you know someone," he said. "You'll not be so lonesome with some of your people living there."

"Are you going to live at Kuskak?"

"No; I'll be stationed in the terri-

tory for several months. I'll be in and out of the town a good deal. I hope you'll let me see something of you."

The fine Irish coloring deepened in her cheeks. He had a way of taking in his stride the barriers between them, but it was impossible for her to feel offended at this cheery, vigorous young fellow with the winning smile and the firm-set jaw. She liked the warmth in his honest brown eyes. She liked the play of muscular grace beneath his well-fitting clothes. Sheba did not know, as her resilient muscles carried her forward joyfully, that she was answering the call of youth to youth.

Gordon respected her shyness and moved warily to establish his contact. He let the talk drift to impersonal topics as they picked their way out from the town along the mossy trail.

They were ascending steadily now along a pathway almost too indistinct to follow. The air was aromatic with



The Girl Swung Out Into Space.

pine from a grove that came straggling down the side of a gulch to the brook.

"Do you know, I have a queer feeling that I've seen all this before," the Irish girl said. "Of course I haven't—unless it was in my dreams. Naturally I've thought about Alaska a great deal because my father lived here."

"I didn't know that."

"Yes. He came in with the Klondike stampede." She added quietly: "He died on Bonanza creek two years later."

"Was he a miner?"

"Not until he came north. He had an interest in a claim. It later turned out worthless."

A bit of stiff climbing brought them to a boulder field back of which rose a mountain ridge.

Beyond the boulder field the ridge rose sharply. Gordon looked a little dubiously at Sheba.

"Are you a good climber?"

"I'm sure I must be," she answered with a smile. "I believe I could do the Matterhorn today."

Well up on the shoulder of the ridge they stopped to breathe. The distant noise of falling water came faintly to them.

"We're too far to the left—must have followed the wrong spur," Elliot explained. "Probably we can cut across the face of the mountain."

Presently they came to an impasse. The gulch between the two spurs terminated in a rock wall that fell almost sheer for two hundred feet.

The color in the cheeks beneath the eager eyes of the girl was warm.

"Let's try it," she begged.

The young man had noticed that she was as sure-footed as a mountain goat and that she could stand on the edge of a precipice without dizziness. The surface of the wall was broken. What it might be beyond he could not tell, but the first fifty feet was a bit of attractive and not too difficult rock traverse.

They had been following a ledge that narrowed till it ran out. Jutting knobs of feldspar and stunted shrubs growing from crevices offered toe-grips instead of the even foothold of the rock itself. As Gordon looked down at the dizzy fall beneath them his judgment told him they had better go back. He said as much to his companion.

The smile she flashed at him was delightfully provocative. "So you think I'm a 'fraid-cat, Mr. Elliot?"

His inclination marched with hers. It was their first adventure together and he did not want to spoil it by undue caution. There really was not much danger yet so long as they were careful.

Gordon abandoned the traverse and followed an ascending crack in the wall. The going was hard. He looked down at the girl wedged between the slopes of the granite trough.

She read his thought. "The Old Guard never surrenders, sir," was her quick answer as she brushed in salute with the tips of her fingers a stray lock of hair.

The trough was worse than Elliot had expected. It had in it a good deal of loose rubble that started in small slides at the least pressure.

"Be very careful of your footing," he called back anxiously.

A small grassy platform lay above the upper end of the trough, but the last dozen feet of the approach was a very difficult bit. Gordon fought his way up with his back against one wall and his knees pressed to the other. Three feet short of the platform the rock walls became absolutely smooth. The climber could reach within a foot of the top.

"Are you stopped?" asked Sheba.

"Looks that way."

A small pine projected from the edge of the shelf out over the precipice. It might be strong enough to bear his weight. It might not. Gordon unbuckled his belt and threw one end over the trunk of the dwarf tree. Gingly he tested it with his weight, then went up hand over hand and worked himself over the edge of the little plateau.

"All right?" the girl called up.

"All right. But you can't make it. I'm coming down again."

"I'd like to try it. I'll stop if it's too hard," she promised.

The strength of her slender wrists surprised him. She struggled up the vertical crevasse inch by inch. His heart was full of fear, for a misstep now would be fatal. He lay down with his face over the ledge and lowered to her the buckled loop of his belt. Twice she stopped exhausted, her back and her hands pressed against the walls of the trough angle for support.

"Better give it up," he advised.

"I'll not, then." She smiled stubbornly as she shook her head.

Presently her fingers touched the belt.

Gordon edged forward an inch or two farther. "Put your hand through the loop and catch hold of the leather above," he told her.

She did so, and at the same instant her foot slipped. The girl swung out into space suspended by one wrist. The muscles of Elliot hardened into steel as they responded to the strain. His body began to slide very slowly down the incline.

In a moment the acute danger was past. Sheba had found a hold with her feet and relieved somewhat the dead pull upon Elliot.

She had not voiced a cry, but the face that looked up into his was very white.

"Take your time," he said in a quiet, matter-of-fact way.

With his help she came close enough for him to reach her hand. After that it was only a moment before she knelt on the plateau beside him.

"Touch and go, wasn't it?" Sheba tried to smile, but the colorless lips told the young man she was still faint from the shock.

He knew he was going to reproach himself bitterly for having led her into such a risk, but he could not just now afford to waste his energies on regrets.

"You might have sprained your wrist," he said lightly as he rose to examine the cliff still to be negotiated.

Her dark eyes looked at him with quick surprise. "So I might," she answered dryly.

But his indifferent tone had the effect upon her of a plunge into cold water. It braced and stiffened her will. If he wanted to ignore the terrible danger through which she had passed, certainly she was not going to remind him of it.

Gordon was mountaineer enough to know that the climb up is safer than the one back. The only possible way for them to go down the trough was for him to lower her by the belt until she found footing enough to go alone.

He did not quite admit it to himself, but in his heart he doubted whether she could make it safely.

The alternative was the cliff face.

CHAPTER IV.

Across the Traverse.

Elliot took off his shoes and turned toward the traverse.

"Think I'll see if I can cross to that stairway. You had better wait here, Miss O'Neill, until we find out if it can be done."

Sheba looked across the cliff and down to the boulder bed two hundred feet below. "You can never do it in the world. Isn't there another way up?"

"No. The wall above us slopes out. I've got to cross to the stairway. If I make it I'm going to get a rope."

"Do you mean you're going back to town for one?"

"Yes."

Her eyes fastened to his in a long, unspoken question. She read the answer. He was afraid to have her try the trough again. To get back to town by way of their roundabout ascent would waste time. If he was going to

rescue her before night, he must take the shortest cut, and that was across the face of the sheer cliff. For the first time she understood how serious was their plight.

The glance of the girl swept again the face of the wall he must cross. It could not be done without a rope. Her fear-filled eyes came back to his. "It's my fault. I made you come," she said in a low voice.

"Nonsense," he answered cheerfully. "There's no harm done. If I can't reach the stairway I can come back and go down by the trough."

Sheba assented doubtfully. It had come on to drizzle again. The rain was fine and cold, almost a mist, and already it was forming a film of ice on the rocks.

"I can't take time to go back by the trough. The point is that I don't want you camped up here after night. There has been no sun on this side of the spur and in the chill of the evening it must get cold even in summer."

He was making his preparations as he talked. His coat he took off and threw down. His shoes he tied by the laces to his belt.

"I'll try not to be very long," he promised.

"It's God's will then, so it is," she sighed, relapsing into the vernacular.

Her voice was low and not very steady, for the heart of the girl was heavy. She knew she must not protest his decision. That was not the way to play the game. But somehow the salt had gone from their light-hearted adventure.

Elliot took her little hand in a warm, strong grip. "You're not going to be afraid. We'll work out all right, you know."

"Yes."

"It's not just the thing to leave a lady in the rain when you take her for a walk, but it can't be helped. We'll laugh about it tomorrow."

Would they? she wondered, answering his smile faintly. Her courage was sapped.

He turned to the climb.

"You've forgotten your coat," she reminded.

"I'm traveling light this trip. You'd better slip it on before you get chilled."

Sheba knew he had left it on purpose for her.

Her fascinated eyes followed him while he moved out from the plateau across the face of the precipice. He had none of the tools for climbing—no rope, no hatchet, none of the support of numbers. All the allies he could summon were his bare hands and feet, his resilient muscles, and his stout heart. To make it worse, the ice film from the rain coated every jutting inch of quartz with danger.

But he worked steadily forward, moving with the infinite caution of one who knows that there will be no chance to remedy later any mistake. A slight error in judgment, the failure in response of any one of fifty muscles, would send him plunging down.

Here he left him for an instant to sweep the gulf below. She gave a little cry, ran to his coat, and began to wave it. For the first time since Elliot had begun to traverse she took the initiative in speech.

"I see some people away over to the left, Mr. Elliot. I'm going to call to them." Her voice throbbed with hope.

But it was not her shouts or his, which would not have carried one-tenth the distance, that reached the group in the valley. One of them caught a glimpse of the wildly waving coat. There was a consultation and two or three fluttered handkerchiefs in response. Presently they moved on.

Sheba could not believe her eyes. "They're not leaving us surely?" she gasped.

"That's what they're doing," answered Gordon grimly. "They think we're calling to them out of vanity to show them where we climbed."

"Oh!" She struggled a sob.

"I'm going to make it. I think I see my way from here," her companion called across to her. "A fault runs to the foot of the stairway, if I can only do the next yard or two."

He did them, by throwing caution to the winds. An icy, rounded boulder projected above him out of reach. He unfastened his belt again and put the shoes, tied by the laces, around his neck. There was one way to get across to the ledge of the fault. He took hold of the two ends of the belt, crouched and leaned forward on tiptoes toward the knob. The loop of the belt slid over the ice-coated boss. There was no chance to draw back now, to test the hold he had gained. If the leather slipped he was lost. His body swung across the abyss and his feet landed on the little ledge beyond.

His shout of success came perhaps ten minutes later. "I've reached the stairway, Miss O'Neill. I'll try not to be long, but you'd better exercise to keep up the circulation. Don't worry, please. I'll be back before night."

"I'm so glad," she cried joyfully. "I was afraid for you. And I'll not worry a bit. Good-by."

Elliot made his way up to the summit and ran along a footpath which brought him to a bridge across the mountain stream just above the falls. Before he had specialized on the short distances Gordon had been a cross-country runner. He was in fair condition and he covered the ground fast.

Elliot discovers that he and Sheba have mutual friends. He and Macdonald, naturally antagonistic, become energetic rivals for the girl's favor.

(TO BE CONTINUED.)

But Not Quite.

"Father, what is a glutton?" "A glutton is a grown man who can eat almost as much as a small boy."—Lila